

VZCZCXRO6643
PP RUEHDBU
DE RUEHNT #1300/01 1971409
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 161409Z JUL 07 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY TASHKENT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8134
INFO RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 3136
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ASTANA 9279
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 1178
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 3749
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 3611
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0882
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 7116
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0326
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2016
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0780
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TASHKENT 001300

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/16/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [UZ](#)

SUBJECT: UZBEK OFFICIALS SHOW A HINT OF FLEXIBILITY IN
TALKS WITH AMBASSADOR-AT-LARGE HANFORD

REF: TASHKENT 1197

TASHKENT 00001300 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: CDA BRAD HANSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford met with four key Uzbek Government interlocutors during his five-day visit to Tashkent. All fiercely defended Uzbekistan's record on religious freedom and suggested that the country's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) was the result of inaccurate and baseless reporting by US diplomats. However, officials acknowledged that there are some provisions of Uzbek law that may be overly restrictive because of Uzbekistan's "transitional" status as a newly independent state. In a final, "unofficial" meeting with Ambassador Hanford, Deputy Foreign Minister Shoazim Minovarov suggested it might be possible to conduct a dialogue on possible changes to policy and legislation, including an exchange of confidential letters, to eventually have CPC status lifted. However, he urged the USG to pursue a discreet, "friendly" approach that does not further damage Uzbekistan's dignity with threats of sanctions. This first round of meetings revealed more flexibility from the Uzbeks than expected. However, there is a long and difficult road ahead. End summary.

¶2. (C) During his five-day visit to Uzbekistan from June 25 to June 30, Ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford met with Uzbek government officials following on Uzbekistan's designation in November 2006 as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for religious freedom. The purpose of the discussions was to gauge Uzbekistan's willingness to make changes in its religion policies and legislation before sanctions must be imposed under US law. In addition to leaders and other representatives of several religious communities in both Tashkent and Bukhara (septel), Hanford also met with Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov, Deputy Foreign Minister Shoazim Minovarov, Human Rights Ombudsman Sayyora Rashidova, and Ortiq Yusupov, Acting Chairman of the Committee on Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers. Notably, the Government did not grant a request for a meeting with Bakhrom Abduhalimov, the Presidential Advisor for Religious Affairs.

(ALMOST) ALL HAVE EQUAL ACCESS TO RELIGION

13. (C) All the officials vehemently defended Uzbekistan's record on religious freedom, pointing out that under Soviet rule virtually all mosques and other places of worship and religious education were closed. Since independence, in contrast, hundreds of mosques have opened, and Uzbekistan now has eleven madrassahs training imams, as well as other institutions of higher learning specializing in Islamic studies. All major religions are registered by the Government, and all registered religions are treated equally under the law. Furthermore, the officials proudly noted that the International Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) designated Tashkent as a capital of world Islamic culture for 2007. (Note: Actually, Tashkent is one of four Islamic cultural capitals designated by ISESCO. End Note.) This, they said, is bona fide evidence of Uzbekistan's flourishing religious life and the freedom of its 90-percent Muslim population to practice their faith.

14. (C) One exception to Uzbekistan's overall religious tolerance, which all officials acknowledged, is the country's ban on proselytism. Under Uzbek law, the practice is criminalized, which has resulted in several prosecutions, particularly of evangelical Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Ambassador Hanford noted that another major concern that led to the CPC designation was the difficulty that many groups have in registering. Without legal registration, religious groups are technically committing a crime every time they meet to worship. Uzbekistan requires that any local religious group have at least 100 members in order to register, a higher standard than any other Central Asian country and one which effectively outlaws any smaller group.

TASHKENT 00001300 002.2 OF 003

15. (C) A further concern Ambassador Hanford raised with all officials is the effective ban on private religious education. While Uzbekistan may boast of several functioning institutions that train clergy, there are very few options for those wishing to learn more about their faith without pursuing a career in a religious institution. Finally, and most seriously, Hanford raised the issue of the continuing practice of torture, which has been reported in connection with the arrests and investigation of many--overwhelmingly Muslim--detainees accused of religious extremism and terrorist activity. Hanford expressed the concern that reportedly many persons arrested were not affiliated with terrorist groups, were considered suspect based simply on their conservative Muslim practices, and were tortured into signing false confessions which served as the justification for long prison sentences.

"WE ARE NOT CONCERNED WITH SANCTIONS"

16. (C) Foreign Minister Norov described Uzbekistan's long history of cultural diversity and inter-religious tolerance and professed bewilderment at the CPC designation. He complained that the USG had unfairly singled out Uzbekistan for harsh treatment when other Central Asian countries--he noted Turkmenistan in particular--have far worse records of restricting religious practice. He asked, "Why do we need to follow US law? What are our violations?" He protested that reports of harassment of religious groups are generally attributable to inaccurate reporting from dubious sources. Ombudsman Sayyora Rashidova, commenting on reports of torture, said, "Perhaps you are referring to some cases from several years ago.... Today all accusations of torture are fully investigated, and those responsible are firmly dealt with." Foreign Minister Norov flatly dismissed accusations of torture, saying that such reports are "baseless." In another comparison, he noted that several prison inmates had

recently committed suicide in Kazakhstan as a result of mistreatment. He went on to allude to US abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.

¶7. (C) Norov left very little hope that Uzbekistan would acknowledge it has a problem with religious freedom, much less alter its policies and legislation to address the issue. He declared that Uzbekistan is "not concerned" by the threat of US sanctions, as Uzbekistan is capable of fending for itself in the area of economic development, national security, and other traditional areas of US assistance. In a familiar refrain, Committee for Religious Affairs Chairman Yusupov emphasized, "All countries have their laws, and they must be followed. Law is the most important thing in a democracy."

HOWEVER, WE MIGHT BE A LITTLE FLEXIBLE...

¶8. (C) At certain moments during the discussions, officials noted that while the law is supreme, it is not immutable. Ortiq Yusupov commented that Uzbekistan's law on religion is legislation for a society in transition, a refrain echoed later by Deputy Foreign Minister Minovarov. While Uzbekistan is still a young state, it is important to preserve tolerance and harmony through strict legislation. However, he said, the law must change with time to adapt to changing circumstances. In particular, Ambassador Hanford raised the question of registering local groups with fewer than 100 members, if they are affiliated with groups already registered at the national level. Yusupov said, "If these small groups prepare their registration documents, we will consider them."

...IF YOU TRY A DISCREET APPROACH

¶9. (C) On the final day of the visit, Deputy Foreign Minister Shoazim Minovarov invited Ambassador Hanford to the Foreign Ministry for an extended "unofficial" discussion. Minovarov, formerly the long-time Chairman of the Committee on Religious

TASHKENT 00001300 003.2 OF 003

Affairs, served briefly in 2006 as Presidential Advisor on Religious Affairs. His current portfolio at the Foreign Ministry includes Uzbekistan's relations with the Muslim world, specifically the Middle East and North Africa. He opened the discussion by asking, now that Ambassador Hanford had seen for himself the tolerance and diversity of the country's religious life, whether it would be possible to remove the CPC designation entirely.

¶10. (C) Hanford explained the CPC process, noting that some improvement in Uzbekistan's situation must be seen before CPC designation may be lifted. He cited as an example the case of Vietnam, in which the USG and the Vietnamese Government had exchanged confidential notes in which Vietnam agreed to particular changes in its religion policy, and as a result of strong improvements in the agreed areas the CPC designation was lifted.

¶11. (C) Minovarov agreed to pass Hanford's suggestion to higher authorities. He said that, if the Foreign Minister agrees to an exchange of letters, then the Uzbek counterpart will probably be the Committee on Religious Affairs. He emphasized, however, the need for a discreet process that would not subject Uzbekistan to open, public criticism. He explained that Uzbek officials have no objection when their American counterparts come to them with "friendly advice" about governance; however, the CPC designation and the threat of sanctions have "damaged our dignity." He said that in time, it will be possible for Uzbekistan to do away with restrictive laws, but the country cannot be hurried. "The limitations in the law should be seen as temporary measures," he said. He acknowledged that the US and Uzbekistan need each other, and that Uzbekistan is ready for open dialogue,

if it is conducted in a friendly spirit.

COMMENT: A LONG ROAD AHEAD

¶12. (C) This opening round of discussions on religious freedom found the Uzbek side unexpectedly willing to be flexible. Foreign Minister Norov, early in the visit, adopted a principled, rigid approach, characterizing CPC designation as a gross misunderstanding caused entirely by the USG. However, Deputy Minister Minovarov, in the final, "unofficial" meeting, may have more closely approximated the Uzbek side's willingness to compromise, if we meet them halfway by taking a more discreet approach. The Uzbek Government reviles nothing so much as negative publicity. Thus, Ambassador Hanford's assurances of discretion and confidentiality were valued concessions in and of themselves.

SIPDIS

Thoughtful, intensive diplomacy may actually bring about some change on the Uzbek side. However, it will not be easy, and it is far from assured.

HANSON